‘It’s all about the grade.’
Students perceptions of innovative assessment methods
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1. Background

- Assessment has been acknowledged as being of central importance to the student learning experience. However, assessment practices have been consistently highlighted as one of the weakest features by the Quality Assurance Agency (Rust, O’Donovan & Price, 2005).
- Literature has emerged over the past decade surrounding the issue of assessment practices in Higher Education, in particular how assessment can enhance the student learning experience. (Bloxham & West, 2007; Rust, O’Donovan & Price, 2005; Struyven, Dochy & Joensens, 2005).
- However, research has suggested that students are outcome orientated in that they do not focus on the process of learning, or even the product, rather the consequence of the product. (Biggs, 2003).
- As a result, this raises the question of how we encourage students to focus on the processes of learning.
- In recent years there has been a dramatic growth of ‘innovative’ assessment types, e.g. e portfolios such as Pebble Pad, peer assessment, and forms of computer supported learning.
- Therefore, it is important to examine students’ perceptions of assessment, to explore how they are assessed and the impact that this may have on their approach to study.

Research question

• Do innovative assessment methods encourage students to focus on the processes of learning?

2. Method

• Focus groups were conducted with 8 undergraduate and 7 postgraduate Psychology students.
- The students ranged in age from 19 to 38 with a mean age of 23.1 (SD = 5.8) years.
- Students were drawn from a convenience sample.
- Students were excluded if they had not previously completed any form of innovative assessment.
- Transcripts from each focus group were analysed using Ritchie and Spencer’s (1994) Thematic framework method.

3. Findings

• Students’ perceived innovative assessments to have a positive effect on their learning if they:
  - Related to authentic ‘real world’ tasks. These authentic tasks were perceived positively by students and represented the kind of activities that they may encounter in ‘real life’. Innovative assessments, such as the negotiated learning module, were also viewed as an opportunity to develop knowledge and capabilities that may benefit them in the future and consequently be of long term benefit.
  - Encouraged the application of psychological knowledge. Students additionally emphasised the benefit of innovative assessment in enabling them to apply their psychological knowledge to real world contexts.
  - Encouraged the development of transferable skills. Students identified that widening participation has led to an increased number of graduates and are aware that they may not walk straight into a job after they have graduated. Consequently, students perceive assessments that facilitate the development of transferable skills necessary to gain employment as instrumental in the effectiveness of innovative assessment.
  - Innovative assessments may also enhance the learning experience of students encouraging engagement with course material and an emphasis on meaning making.
  - However, the extent to which these perceptions impacted upon the students’ approach to study was unclear. Despite the positive features of innovative assessments, students’ remained outcome orientated and perceived their assignment grade to be of ultimate importance. This was directly related to students’ aspirations on leaving university, particularly employability and progression onto postgraduate courses.

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